Clapham Old Town Regeneration Project

Review of third phase of public consultation for LB Lambeth by the Consultation Institute

Overall conclusion

The Consultation Institute’s overall conclusion is that on balance the phase 3 consultation has been structured and delivered in a professional manner. Some of the information about the options could have been more clearly presented and more background information could have been made available. However, a good response rate was achieved, useful data was gathered and reported, and changes were made to the scheme.

Background and methodology

The Consultation Institute (TCI) was asked by the London Borough of Lambeth to review the phase 3 public consultation that was carried out over summer 2012. We have also looked briefly at reports on the first phase of consultation on the Project which ran from September to December 2009 and the second phase of public consultation which took place during September and October 2010, although we have not made a detailed assessment of them.

TCI’s review was carried out by Mike Bartram, an Associate of the Institute, during August 2012. The review was based on a meeting with George Wright and Genstacia Bull at Blue Star House on 14 August and a study of the documents available on the website www.lambeth.gov.uk/claphamoldtown, in particular:

- Clapham Old Town Newsletter, June 2012
- Exhibition boards (Creating a new urban heart for Clapham Old Town – proposals option A and option B; context and objectives; station area consultation boards)

In addition, TCI looked at the following documents:

- Clapham Old Town – have your say (leaflet, June 2012)
- Clapham Old Town Feedback Form
- Emails from David Rowe (TfL), the MP for Vauxhall (31 July 2012) and the Leader of the Liberal Democrat Group on the London Assembly (11 August 2012), all to Abu Barkatoolah (LB Lambeth); and emails from a Clapham resident to Leon Daniels, TfL (24 June 2012) and to Margaret Kalaugher, TfL (8 July 2012)
- Report on research undertaken on the consultation of the Clapham Regeneration Project, Clark Chapman, July 2012
- 513-A9.2-Clapham Old Town Regeneration-Public consultations: note of comments made at three “meet the design team with the working model” sessions dated 30 June, 5 July and 15 July
- Clapham Old Town project: key feedback for Design Review Meeting 31/7/12 and note of Design team meeting 31/7/12
- Clapham Old Town Regeneration Project – draft third phase consultation report
- Clapham Old Town Regeneration Project - draft officer delegated decision report (August 2012)
The review took the form of a critical appraisal of the following points:

- Objectives and questions
- Quality and comprehensiveness of information
- Effective targeting of publicity
- Response rate
- Analysis of consultation responses
- Changes made to scheme
- Reporting
- Criticisms of, and complaints about, the consultation
- Duration of consultation
- Adherence to Government Code of Practice on Consultation and the Consultation Institute’s Consultation Charter

We have neither sought to evaluate whether the scheme is a ‘good’ scheme, nor to take a view on the scope of the consultation, simply on its delivery.

Having been commissioned after the close of the consultation, we have been unable to attend any of the Meet the Design Team sessions or Design Review Group meetings, so our report does not review the conduct of these engagements.

Objectives

Although clear, written objectives for the Clapham Old Town Regeneration Project as a whole have been published, the phase 3 consultation does not appear to have been guided by any specific consultation objectives, beyond seeking comments on the options. The lack of clear, written consultation objectives is not particularly unusual for schemes of this nature, and does not represent a significant shortcoming. However, precise objectives might have helped to focus the consultation materials more effectively. In particular, we would like to have seen a clear statement of what was open to influence.

Questions

It is important that consultation questions are relevant to the consultation objectives, neutral (non-leading) and clear (as far as possible giving rise to unambiguous responses) and that they provide an opportunity for consultees to say what they wish. We have no problem with the consultation questions which, in a number of respects, represent good practice:

- Mixture of open and closed questions
- Inclusion of options for ‘voting’ (which we know from opinion research is valued by consultees)

We have not taken a view as to the scope of the consultation and hence the scope of the questions; the question inviting “any other comments about the whole scheme” keeps the scope open.
Quality and comprehensiveness of information

For consultees to be able to engage properly with the consultation topic and offer informed responses to the questions asked they need to be given clear, accurate, unbiased, comprehensive and timely information.

We welcome the following elements of the information provision, each of which represents good practice:

• The emphasis of the consultation on high-profile, accessible, on-street public exhibitions staffed by people able to explain the design and engage with questions and suggestions
• The extensive use of photos, satellite photos, artists’ impressions and models making the consultation accessible to people with limited English or who find reading and writing difficult
• The availability of the exhibition boards on the project website, facilitating participation from those unable to attend
• Project objectives were clearly explained; the tube station panel was particularly clear
• Much of the language used in the exhibition boards was clear and accessible, (although a number of terms such as ‘connectivity’ and ‘severance’ may not have been understood by everyone reading them).

We would like to have seen:

• A clear statement about the purpose of the consultation, highlighting precisely what consultees were being asked, distinguishing the phase 3 consultation from the earlier consultations and highlighting matters previously decided upon and no longer up for discussion, e.g. conversion of Old Town West to two-way operation
• A clear statement on the display boards about how to respond to the consultation and what happens next
• Clearer information about the two options:
  - a clearer explanation of the distinction between option A and option B, highlighting their respective benefits and impacts: much of the description on the boards is given over to common features of the two schemes, making differences more difficult to identify
  - a more explicit connection between the problems identified about the Clapham Old Town area and the way in which these are addressed by the two options
  - maps highlighting more clearly the most important differences between the two options, particularly for those viewing them on the internet without the benefit of staff assistance
  - visualisations which highlighted the key differences between the options in a more objective manner: the visualisations do not appear to facilitate a fair comparison between the two options
  - more emphasis on the size and location of the public space and the consequences and implications of creating that space on other issues, such as access, parking and loading, and getting on and off buses.

While we appreciate that staff were on hand to answer technical questions at meetings and exhibitions, we would have liked to have seen more detailed background information made available at the time of the consultation for those who wanted to read up more and familiarise themselves with the evidence base for statements made about the proposals and options in the consultation.
In the absence of robust opinion research among the respondents, there is no evidence of the impact of the written and visual information provided on respondents’ choice of options. However, it would be surprising if a single component – such as the visualisations – could, on its own, have caused more people to favour option B than option A, given the huge difference in the numbers supporting those options in the consultation.

Response rate

Exhibitions were held at appropriate times and places, including weekends and evenings, and appear to have been well-attended, although unfortunately no record was taken of numbers. We believe that a very local on-street presence, with plenty of images, is one of the best ways of running an inclusive consultation.

We understand that the June 2012 newsletter advertising the consultation was mailed to 5,891 addresses in Clapham Old Town (5,510 residential properties and 381 commercial properties). The 363 consultation responses received from these addresses represents a response rate of over 6%, a figure with which many consultation professionals would be very happy (typically, such consultations might expect to get a 1-2% response rate, although the number of variables make this calculation more of an art than a science).

Also it should be noted that an additional 352 responses were received from outside the Clapham Old Town area: 256 from outside the Clapham Old Town area and 96 with no postcode stated (making a grand total of over 700).

A total of 1,050 page views were recorded between 30 June and 21 July 2012. The 511 online responses suggests a solid conversion rate, especially since some of the page views are likely to have resulted from consultees returning to look at the website for a second time.

Analysis of consultation responses

For a scheme of this size we consider the level of analysis to be appropriate.

By conducting the analysis themselves, LB Lambeth run the risk of criticism from those opposing their proposals. However, we believe this potential criticism is largely offset by their openness to talking TCI through their processes and sharing specific stakeholder responses. The ‘tick-box’ nature of the preferred option question makes it easy to analyse objectively. A statistical summary of the reasons for people’s preferences has been carried out and a wealth of direct quotes has drawn out specific issues for consideration by the Design Team.

We welcome the transparency of the approach, with negative and critical comments included alongside more positive ones.

Changes made to scheme

It is not unusual for a scheme to emerge almost unchanged from a consultation. While this does not of itself prove that consultation has been ineffective, changes of substance made to a scheme may be regarded as a reasonable indication of an effective exercise.
We welcome the fact that several changes have been made to the proposed scheme, e.g. changes to road widths, introduction of contraflow cycle lane on The Pavement, reinstatement of motorcycle parking bay on The Polygon, inclusion of benches in seating specification.

**Reporting**

Many otherwise professionally delivered consultations let themselves down when it comes to feeding back to the public what they have said and the changes that have been made to proposals.

Detailed reports were published on the first two phases of consultation.

LB Lambeth now has a great opportunity to clearly report on the changes it has made, explaining how they emerged from the consultation responses. Equally, it is important for LB Lambeth to explain what consideration has been given to other suggestions and why it has not been possible to incorporate them into the final design. Considered, evidence-based responses to the issues raised and arguments put forward by proponents of option A could help to address the shortcomings in the information previously provided.

**Criticisms and complaints**

We are aware of a number of criticisms of the consultation:

- that the visualisations for options A and B are biased in favour of option B (see our comments under ‘quality and comprehensiveness of information’ above)
- lack of consultation on the removal of the gyratory: we consider that this issue was adequately dealt with in the phase 1 consultation and there is no requirement to consult on it again in phase 3
- that residents and businesses in The Polygon did not receive the Clapham Old town newsletter in June 2012: even if this is the case, it seems unlikely that Polygon residents would have remained unaware of the consultation for long, given the local on-street presence of the Design Team and the high-profile work of local campaigners
- that meetings of the Design Reference Group were poorly organised and publicised and did not provide an adequate opportunity to debate key issues (outside the scope of this review)

**Duration of consultation**

It is generally accepted that consultations of three months duration represent good practice, not least because of the opportunity they provide stakeholder organisations to consult their members on responses.

Although the phase 3 consultation period falls well short of this – in effect the consultation was open for four weeks – the consultation was an iterative, multi-staged process over a three year period and as such appeared to offer ample time for everyone concerned to have their say.
The Consultation Institute’s *Consultation Charter*

The Consultation Institute’s *Consultation Charter* contains seven best practice principles:

- Integrity
- Visibility
- Accessibility
- Transparency
- Disclosure
- Fair Interpretation
- Publication

We are generally happy that these principles were adhered to in this consultation, although as noted above, we would have liked to have seen the publication of stakeholder responses.